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Wartime

Conceptualising Wartime

In *Tense Future* (2015), Paul Saint-Amour advances the concept of 'weak theory'—not only for thinking about the expanding field of modernism, but for finding a response to '[t]hat exemplary strong theory': total war.[1] The idea of 'weak theory' has since taken on critical momentum of its own, with a *Modernism/modernity* special issue in 2018 putting a name to an array of approaches against symptomatic reading under the umbrella category of 'weak', not to mention the spate of responses that have since appeared on the Print Plus platform.[2] The present cluster brings weak theory back to war. It does so not because it wants to winnow down the manifold critical possibilities already opened up, but, on the contrary, because the pluralized temporality of weakness continues to hold new possibilities for how we read and write about war. 'Where strong theory attempts to ride its sovereign axioms to "a future never for a moment in doubt,"' Saint-Amour writes, 'weak theory tries to see just a little way ahead, behind, and to the sides, conceiving even of its field in partial and provisional terms that will neither impede nor shatter the arrival of the unforeseen.'[3] Weak theory suggests a temporality of the unformed, the voluminous, and the indeterminate. It is that temporal mode which emerges across the essays in this special cluster, in which we explore the many ways wartime affects, and is affected by, varieties of temporal critique and temporal understanding.

'Wartime,' according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, appears to be a clearly defined

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[1] Paul Saint-Amour, *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 42.
[2] 'Weak Theory' special issue, ed. Paul Saint-Amour, *Modernism/modernity* 25.3 (September 2018).
[3] Saint-Amour, *Tense*, 40; he is quoting from Wai Chee Dimock, 'Weak Theory: Henry James, Colm Toibin, and W. B. Yeats,' *Critical Inquiry* 39.4 (Summer 2013): 732-53 (733).

temporality: 'wartime (n.) the time when war is being waged.' Wartime is certainly the time of state violence, a time adjudicated by nation states, war cabinets, and generals who declare and end wars—a distinct temporality that, for many others, entails trauma, radical precarity, and powerlessness. But the actual characteristics of what constitutes 'war', and what its waging looks like, are often not so clear-cut. Is all time during war, however defined, wartime? Does one need direct experience of war violence to experience wartime? How does the idea of time vary from war to war? How does the idea of war vary across time? How do differences in location, language, religion, ethnicity, culture, and personhood impact how one apprehends and conceives of wartime?

Scholarship on wartime over the past decade has diversified a 'strong' theory of war's relationship to time in two prominent ways. First, critics have turned to affect theory for rethinking what wartime means and entails, and for advocating for a deeply abstracted, and essentially unbounded, definition of wartime. In *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (2010), Mary Favret treats wartime in the late nineteenth century as a civilian consciousness shaped by the presence, and possibility, of often distant war: a now-familiar way, for the West at least, of thinking about contemporary rather than historical conflicts. Examining the mercurial spatio-temporal effects of war as 'a persistent mode of daily living' and a 'habit of mind,' Favret writes: 'If we take wartime less as an object of cognition bounded by dates—a period—and more as an affecting experience which resonates beyond the here and now, then wartime literature becomes an attempt to trace and give shape to such affect, to register its wayward power.'[4] The point of wartime *is* its ability to impinge upon both military and civilian spheres, it *is* its spatio-temporal permeability and its meandering force. Wartime literature is not necessarily something that claims to have been conceived or published during 'the time in which war is being waged.' Rather, it describes forms of expression that involve an affective theory of

[4] Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 14, 11.

wartime as something both 'strange and familiar, intimate and remote, present and yet not really here': as a temporal condition that is not necessarily durational. [5] It encompasses different tropes, feelings, effects, and sensations depending on who one is and where one is situated.

A second way in which critics have complicated conventional accounts of wartime involves a rather different approach, one that seeks to historicize a conflict's origins, manifestations, and legacies within a longer continuum. For example, Jan Mieszkowski's *Watching War* (2012) has highlighted the ambiguousness of modern war's temporal boundaries as a result of the rise of mobilization in the early twentieth century. With the blurring of military and economic realms following the First World War, he argues, war became the grounds for routine economic activity. In this way, war 'could no longer be distinguished from peace by the presence (or absence) of violence', which means there are striking homologies between First World wartime and Cold wartime.[6] Meanwhile, questions about space and geography have also pointed to ways of looking at conflict within longer timescales. This is especially evident in recent studies of the First World War; that conflict is increasingly seen as a diversified and historically- and culturally-specific event whose temporalities stretch beyond the datelines of 1914-1918. Two different books, for instance—Richard S. Grayson's *Dublin's Great Wars* (2018) and Robert Gerwarth's *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (2016)—powerfully extend the years of the war to account for the demobilisation of troops and for other more 'local' and colonial conflicts, such as the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) or the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923).[7] Some critics have embraced a still longer durée, like Kaushik Roy in *The Army in British India* (2013), who discusses nearly a hundred years of Indian wartime—from the military uprising of the mid-nineteenth century. [8] Most influential, perhaps, is Mary Dudziak's study of modern American wartime, *War Time: An Idea, Its Histories, Its Consequences*

[5] Ibid., 15.
[6] Jan Mieszkowski, *Watching War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 149.
[7] Richard S. Grayson, *Dublin's Great Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917-1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).
[8] Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War 1857-1947* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

(2012), which analyses, from a legal-political framework, the way conflicts spill past start and end dates, to ultimately argue that the United States have been embroiled in continuous military interventionism since at least 1898.[9]

The state machinery that dictates war and imposes a certain understanding of time; the manifold variables in how the temporalities of war are experienced; the way wars relate to one another and to other geopolitical developments: these issues, and their tensions and intersections, underpin the impulses and multiple directions undertaken by the essays in this cluster. These contributors investigate many wartimes across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, acknowledging how a pluralized understanding of wartime is host to other concerns, including scientific philosophies of time, psychoanalysis, imperialism and neo-colonialism, and the changing nature of geologic and planetary time. They examine how and why many wars and many times co-exist, conflict with, or are nestled within, one another. They speak of wartime in ways that contextualize, without conflating, the properties of different wartimes, and the temporal effects and affects of different wars. Thus the title for this cluster, 'Wartime', is not meant to denote a single temporality, *the* time of war, but a way of reading that decouples those two words—war and time—to explode each in turn and to reconsider their dynamic meanings, individually and together.

Narrative Wartime

Nevertheless, what distinguishes this cluster from other scholarship cited is a focus on narrative. While others have offered redefinitions of wartime, troubling it as an affective and historical category, there remains the question of wartime not as one of personal or historical experience, but as an aesthetic challenge: wartime as a phenomenon of expression or interpretation. The essays in this cluster embrace a wide range of genres and forms, including memorial culture,

[9] Mary Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

pamphlets, fiction, poetry, film, and the visual arts, while first-hand accounts of war such as diaries, memoirs, and letters—those with seemingly more immediate connections to wartime—are lacking. Most of the contributions in this cluster also consider literary, theoretical, and artistic works by figures who are not direct victims or participants of war violence; they are not the people bombed and injured, but (largely Western) writers thousands of miles away from any conventionally-understood battlefield. Clearly, there are differences between the temporality of war itself and the narrative strategies across different media of investigating such temporalities, even when the two intersect. So it is worth pausing here to think more specifically about narrative wartime—about the complex relationships between the temporalities of war as historical experience, and how they are articulated or represented—to see why narrative is central to a heterogeneous understanding of wartime.

'War,' Lyndsey Stonebridge writes, 'both threatens and provokes narrative.'[10] The statement is at once forceful and compelling, yet rich with ambiguity. Why exactly does war both threaten and provoke narrative, and what does this paradoxical relationship say about narrative itself? Stonebridge goes on: 'It threatens, as Walter Benjamin pointed out famously, because it degrades experience to the extent that narrative communication itself is thrown into crisis; and it provokes for precisely the same reason.'[11] The essay to which she is referring, Benjamin's 'The Storyteller' (1936), observes that 'men returned from the [First World War] battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience [*Erfahrung*].'[12] The horrors of the front are literally not articulable, so narrative itself has closed up. Benjamin then goes on to explain that this condition goes beyond the combatant: 'never has experience been more contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience

[10] Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 57.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov', *Illuminations*, with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 83-107 (84).

by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.'[13] Benjamin not only claims that wartime disrupts capacities for narrative, but that war's effects on communication are widespread: that wartime 'experience' is felt by a whole generation in social, political, ethical, and psychological terms, especially in relation to a sharpened awareness of 'the tiny, fragile human body.'[14] Throughout his writings, Benjamin uses the terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, both of which are typically translated as 'experience'. They mean rather different things in German, however. The former suggests an idea of experience as the sensations lived or witnessed, while the latter suggests a sense of wisdom or understanding drawn from experience directed towards the world at large.[15] Thus in 'The Storyteller', Benjamin is speaking of wartime not as an immediately individual experience, but as a deeper, collective condition of being.

Narrative, then, can register the silences of wartime, which Benjamin understands in an expansive and affective sense. For him, the First World War was a culminating event in a long historical shift in narrative form—from the dominance of oral storytelling to that of the written book—and the novel, he avers, has become the place where 'the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns' can gesture towards 'the incommensurable… in the representation of human life.'[16] This is why narrative seems able to offer some kind of response to war. For narrative's temporal incommensurability is its strength: a narrative can run backwards and forwards; it can slow or speed up time; it can present multiple synchronous temporalities or multiple alternative realities; it can treat history in a realist or counterfactual manner; it can do away with history altogether and create a different world with different laws and a different logic. Narrative temporality is pliable enough to register

[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] As Richard White puts it, key to Benjamin's account of storytelling is 'as something that involves the collective depth of cultural life—or tradition—as opposed to the individual's own personal experience: *Erfahrung* as opposed to *Erlebnis*' ('Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller" and the Possibility of Wisdom', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 51.1 (Spring 2017): 1-14 (7)).
[16] Benjamin, 87.

a more capacious understanding of wartime. This is evident in the rich and complex body of wartime literature which engages in radical narratological experimentation.

But war, one might say, is intrinsically recalcitrant to narrative, because narrative, as an act of representation, gives shape and meaning to time. H. Porter Abbott defines narrative as '*the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time*'.[17] If this is the case, a similar logic would suggest that narrative helps to organize our understanding of wartime—a temporality that, as we have seen, fundamentally resists organization and simplification. And if, in Paul Ricoeur's classic statement, 'Time becomes human time to the extent it is organized after the manner of a narrative,' then narrative itself is a fatal mode for representing war: a phenomenon with meaning for those who wage it, perhaps, in the name of a person, a country, or an ideology, but not for the tiny, fragile human body that will be injured or obliterated, the body for whom human time will be irredeemably altered or destroyed.[18] This is why narrative *both* threatens and provokes narrative, simultaneously: it offers a way of representing war, but it also risks eliding the fundamental fact of war's temporal intractability, and its inhumanity.

One might reasonably ask whether there is a causal connection between the temporality of war, and the complex temporal experimentations of war literature (textual or otherwise) being examined in this cluster, or whether this is incidental.[19] Indeed, in some of these essays, the question of wartime is less immediately evident, even obscure. I cannot speak on behalf of the contributors, but I will suggest that the difficult ethical-political work of wartime literature lies as much with the writer as it does the reader. In fact, almost all of these essays focus less on what Kent Puckett calls the narrative problem of wartime, of how to represent it, and more on the narrative problem of *how to read and interpret* wartime. And herein lies a difference between the heterogeneity presented by narrative wartime and those presented by the affective and historical

[17] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3 (his emphases).
[18] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), vol. I, 3
[19] I am grateful to the anonymous reader of this cluster, who raised this important question.

understandings of wartime discussed earlier. While narrative offers many ways of articulating the temporalities of war, it provides many ways of perceiving and interpreting it as well. This can be seen in the extremely diverse approaches taken to thinking about wartime across the cluster. Some of the contributors view wartime as a way of understanding contemporary history as a narrative of recurring political violence. Others read the concept of wartime narratively in terms of metaphor, genre, or style to untangle the perceptual and rhetorical work that war does, when it is called as such. For others still, wartime is a way of understanding other parallel or overlapping narratives related to neo-colonialism and the Anthropocene. Together, the essays corroborate and extend extant scholarship on wartime through critical manoeuvres that reflect on the implications of reading wartime *as* wartime. They scrutinize how acts of reading can by turns open up or occlude various intensities of meaning inherent in the coupling of war with time.

Literary studies, of course, is at a moment of conscious self-scrutiny regarding its ability to make strong or weak claims, and at a moment of interrogating how contingent and variegated its cultures and practices of reading are.[20] But there is especial resonance for this kind of self-reflexivity for understanding wartime, since reading war narratively—being attentive to the mechanics and implications of how wartime is both represented and interpreted—involves engaging in iterations of temporal understanding that a strong theory, like total war, would claim to have absorbed. In 'Storytime and its Futures' (2002), Gillian Beer points out that the temporal plurality of narrative rests not only with the writer's experimentation, but with the reader's interpretation. The reader, Beer suggests, has a kind of temporal control over narrative that the writer does not; she decides what the time of the reading is, when to pick up or put down a book, how fast or slow to engage with it, how to integrate it into the non-literary realm beyond. Moreover, even while the reader accepts that a narrative is in theory foreclosed, she reads as

[20] See, for example, the special issues on 'Cultures of Reading' in *PMLA* 133.5 (October 2018) and *PMLA* 134.1 (January 2019).

though it isn't: fiction has a 'power of generating plural futures in the reader's mind, against the grain of knowing that the text is already written. That temporal paradox is central to the joy and grief of the reading experience.'[21] This paradox is so powerful that it even survives subsequent readings; the reader still 'cranes forward through the fiction, imagining alternative futures at every point' of a narrative.[22] With the cluster's tremendously varied readings of narrative wartime, a unique quality of narrative itself is being exploited and upheld: the ability to engage in multiple temporalities and multiple futures, and the ability to explore time's relationship to war as multitudinous and layered, rather than binary and foreclosed.

The first three essays of this cluster explore the way wartime in the early to mid-twentieth century intersects with contemporaneous contexts such as aesthetic modernism, theories and philosophies of time, and colonialism. Focusing on the First World War and the two-minute commemorative silence, Randall Stevenson discusses how the two minutes could be both 'short and long' because the subject of remembrance varied from person to person, and how this temporal elasticity coincided with parallel interests in modernist interiority and scientific ideas of relativity. Where commemoration is, in some ways, about making history possible—it suspends daily activity to bring one's relation to the collective past in focus—Adam Piette's essay is about a kind of non-linear, doubled wartime in which the past sits uneasily with the present. Through Freud's concept of the involute, Piette identifies a way in which mid-century writers invoked earlier modernists to express the historical anxieties of 'past postpropheticals', to borrow from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—a period when the return of one world war is triggered by the expectation, and then arrival, of another.[23] Focusing on postcolonial temporalities, Nasser Mufti then offers what he calls a 'proliferated' understanding of civil wartime with regards to 1940s India. Noting that orientalist discourse fashions civil war as durational or geographically and temporally bounded, he suggests that wartime for mid-century India is the conjunction between

[21] Gillian Beer, 'Storytime and its Futures', in *Time*, ed. Katinka Ridderbos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 126-42 (135).
[22] Ibid., 133.
[23] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939; London: Faber & Faber, 2002), p. 9, line 36.

a web of 'historical sensibilities' related to communal violence, anti-colonial nationalism and futurity, and neo-colonialism.

The next three essays each take a specific genre—the war film, detective fiction, and the epic—to reflect upon the limits and affordances of generic modes of representation. In his essay, Kent Puckett points out that Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) is in fact a suspense film structured around a ticking clock: a countdown towards the moment when the film's fractured storylines in the air, on land, and in the water meet in diegetic time. But the aesthetic beauty and narrative virtuosity of Nolan's film raise questions about how art handles another narrative: what Puckett calls 'the historical or ethical *real*' of war. Jane Hu engages in a weak reading of the detective fiction genre to show how a complex chronotope of different wartimes emerge. In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans* (2000), which is split between London and Shanghai in the 1930s, various temporalities—pre-war, interwar, wartime, post-war—come together prismatically through modes of readerly 'detection' or interpretation. Like Hu, Kate McLoughlin looks at the spatial and geographical specificities undergirding any understanding of wartime, but she turns to a site of today's 'Forever War', Iraq.[24] Although Iraqi war poetry often involve allusions to deep, geologic time—a trope central to the epic—there is unique importance in this 'time-trick' for poets speaking about a place that has borne the brunt of seemingly endless invasion and cyclical violence for more than a millennia.

Finally, Paul Saint-Amour's afterword chimes with McLoughlin's essay in examining how the earth bears records of wartime, but he also contemplates how wartime itself can alter or inscribe itself upon planetary time. He speculates on 'deep war time' through a meditation on No Man's Land—which, in the mid-nineteenth century, was the site of the world's largest archaeological dig, and which, today, bequeaths a 'toxic futurity,' owing to the munitions chemicals and ordnance which have infected its grounds from the First World War. With Saint-

[24] Dexter Filkins, *The Forever War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008). The excellent special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 63.2 (2017), 'Enduring Operations: Narratives of Contemporary Wars,' has addressed the unstable position of historical or official narratives on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Amour, we go full circle in the cluster, but with a difference. He ends with the implications of deep war time in his immediate present, which happened to be the two-minute silence on the centenary of the Armistice; this leads him to observe that minutes appear 'ill-scaled' for understanding wartime. On the centenary, two minutes seem vastly shorter, and its implications vastly longer, than ever before. In the era of the War on Terror, drone warfare, and the Anthropocene, the question of what war is when war no longer looks like war—and when wartime is short and long, anytime and always—appears to be the question of our times indeed. This cluster hopes to make a timely intervention into a timeless, yet always untimely, phenomenon.